

# **A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF VALUES CLARIFICATION**

by

**David Lipe, Ph.D.**

## **Copyright © Apologetics Press**

All rights reserved. This document may be printed or stored on computer media, on the condition that it will not be republished in print, on-line (including reposting on any personal Web sites, corporate Web sites, organizational Web sites, electronic bulletin boards, etc.), or on computer media, and will not be used for any commercial purposes. Further, it must be copied with source statements (publisher, author, title, bibliographic references, etc.), and must include this paragraph granting limited rights for copying and reproduction, along with the name and address of the publisher and owner of these rights, as listed below. Except for those exclusions mentioned above, and brief quotations in articles or critical reviews, or distribution for educational purposes (including students in classes), no part of this document may be reproduced in any form without permission from the publisher.

**Apologetics Press, Inc.**  
230 Landmark Drive  
Montgomery, AL 36117 U.S.A.  
334/272-8558  
800/234-8558



**[www.ApologeticsPress.org](http://www.ApologeticsPress.org)**

# **A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF VALUES CLARIFICATION**

by

**David Lipe, Ph.D.**

## **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The subject of value(s) has been and continues to be, a crucial subject of philosophical inquiry. Although there are various aspects of value that could be considered as a topic of philosophical investigation, this paper is concerned primarily with the transmission of moral values (i.e., the process by which one person or group is led to embrace the moral values of another person or group) as a fundamental part of the moral development (with particular emphasis given to some current ideas relative to the moral development of the child). Traditionally, the transmission of values has taken place in the context of institutions such as the family, the church, and the school. The basic issue I will examine here is the primary role of one of these institutions in moral development—the school. Specifically, this treatise will critically analyze one particular approach to moral education employed by certain schools—namely, the values clarification approach as espoused by such men as Louis Rath, Merrill Harmin, Sidney Simon, et al. In my analysis, I will show the inadequacy of the values clarification approach as a means employed to enable a child to develop morally. This paper will not concern itself with an investigation of **what** (i.e., the various techniques) is being done on the practical level to teach values clarification. Rather, it is a philosophical enterprise that limits itself to an investigation of the philosophical aspects and implications of the values clarification approach.

First, I plan to provide a critical analysis of values by making some general remarks relative to moral education. Second, I will give a brief explanation of values clarification and a brief examination of some of its philosophical roots. Third, I will raise some objections to values clarification as an adequate means for moral development. Finally, I will make some brief concluding remarks.

Let me expand my brief opening statement of the basic problem. As I stated above, the transmission of values is a fundamental part of the moral development of a child—which is the basic aim of moral education. There are some difficulties in defining “moral education.” It has been described by some as a

“name for nothing clear” (Wilson, et al., 1967, p. 11), which indicates the confusion concerning its meaning. Others have limited the definition of “moral education” to a specific function of the school (Purpel, et al., 1976, p. 5). Although my definition probably will appear inadequate to some, I understand the expression as follows: Moral education is a direct and indirect intervention by institutions such as the family, the church, and the school (although not necessarily limited to these three) that affects the moral development of a person (including one’s behavior, one’s ability to think about issues of right and wrong, and the actual opinions of right and wrong one holds). This definition is broad in two ways. First, the definition encompasses not only the **deliberate**, avowed effect of various institutions on the moral development of a person, but also the **accidental**, unavowed effect on a person’s development. As an example of the latter, one might consider the influence on a person’s moral development as a result of the unintentional conveyance of a particular ideology by an educator. Second, the aim of moral education should take into account: (1) the actual behavior of a person in a situation involving right and wrong; (2) the person’s ability to think critically about moral problems; and (3) the actual moral opinions held by an individual.

Moral education generally has been regarded as an integral part of institutions such as the family, the church and the school. However, in recent times the influence of these institutions on moral development has diminished greatly, and the moral confusion being reflected in these situations is obvious to any critical observer. In the following pages, I will give reasons and evidence to substantiate this claim.

First, consider some of the features characteristic of many American families today that have contributed to the diminishing influence of moral education. Not only is the father absent from the family a great part of the day, but the mother (in many cases) works outside the home in situations that do not permit her to be home when the children return from school. This decreases the amount of time and contact parents have with their children; thus, the opportunity to influence the moral thinking of children is greatly reduced. Further, many families are broken, i.e., one of the parents is dead, or the parents are separated or divorced. Hence, the family’s influence on moral development is diminished further. Even when families are united, moral confusion exists since different family members hold to conflicting moral values and are not united on traditional value ideals.

Second, the church manifests features that tend to point to its decline in influence and its relationship to moral confusion. The lack of church attendance and respect for the authority of the church indicate the declining influence of the church on the world today. Further, moral confusion is apparent when the traditional, fixed moral doctrines upheld by the church have given way, in many instances, to the view of further some church leaders that, each person is autonomous and therefore must make up his (or her) own mind concerning moral values.

Third, some brief comments concerning the relationship of the school and moral development should be noted. Since the time of many of the Greek philosophers, the teacher has recognized the function of the school as a moral educator. Many educational scholars have recognized the school's role in moral development. Dewey viewed moral education as crucial to the basic purpose of a school. "The child's moral character must develop in a natural, just, and social atmosphere. The school should provide this environment for its part in the child's moral development" (1934, p. 85). This statement reflects the general notion that the school **should** help to develop students' morals. However, this function of the school has become a much-debated issue. It generally is held by many who believe in separation of church and state that it is not the school's role to function in the development of moral values. These people believe that moral values are matters of private opinion and should not be discussed in the classroom.

Many religionists contend that moral education should not be a part of the school's curriculum because efforts in this direction would amount to indoctrination; they contend that the school is incapable of moral education without indoctrinating, i.e., teaching a given set of values without considering other views and the evidence for or against such views. Further, as Robert Hall noted, the indoctrinator "...generally wants youngsters **not** to use their **reason** about moral issues..." (1978, p. 23, emp. added). This seems to me to be a very close-minded approach to education that makes the purpose of the classroom one in which certain "facts" (values that happen to be in accord with the thinking of the educator) are expounded, and moral thinking about different issues is not stimulated.

Others (including values clarification advocates) contend that moral education is a fundamental part of the school's activities, yet there exists a great divergence of opinion as to **what** moral education pro-

gram should be inaugurated. Further, it generally is agreed (at least in the specific area of behavior) that with the existing programs the school is having less impact on the moral development of children than it did 25 years ago. According to a 1975 survey of the Phi Delta Kappa membership, 69% agreed that the school is having less control than in the past (Ryan and Thompson, 1975, p. 663). Thus, on the one hand there are those who oppose moral education in the classroom completely, and on the other hand there are those who favor moral education in the school but hold that the school is not having the influence it should.

In my view, schools simply **cannot avoid** being involved in the moral values of students. This is the case because moral education (as defined on page 2) includes the accidental, unavowed effect on the child's moral development. At times, a teacher's method of instruction colors his subject matter. This, together with the fact that children absorb practically everything (including particular instruction, attitudes, etc.) from their teacher, makes it unavoidable that moral values will be part of the classroom. Moreover, since the child spends the vast majority of his time in school (six to seven hours a day, approximately 180 days per year), the teacher will have ample opportunity to convey moral values. It is almost inconceivable to me that the moral thinking of a child can be separated from the intellectual aspect of the classroom. A biology class raises questions about the definition, origin, and value of life. A consideration of historical facts raises moral issues relative to activities that occur during war (such as chemical warfare) and even war itself. Moral issues emerge in the political arena when actions of presidents or the Equal Rights Amendment are discussed. Although some might contend that such matters may be discussed separately from moral issues, I argue that this is not a practical possibility. The goal of this paper, therefore, is to discuss one approach employed in the discussion of moral issues—values clarification. I do not claim to know exactly **how** moral education should be conducted; I am only attempting to analyze and criticize what I think is an inadequate approach to the general problem of moral development and its relationship to the classroom.

## EXPLANATION OF THE VALUES CLARIFICATION APPROACH

Of the various approaches to moral education in the schools today, perhaps the most commonly discussed, widely used, and most influential approach is the values clarification approach espoused by Raths, Harmin, and Simon in their book, *Values and Teaching*. Since the publication of this book in 1966, the growth of moral education in general and values clarification in particular has been phenomenal. Purpel and Ryan have attributed the growth and popularity of the values clarification approach to four factors (1976, p. 73).

First, they suggested that the values clarification approach consists of a series of loosely related techniques that are easy to learn and easily accessible to teachers. To equip teachers to be value clarifiers, there are a growing number of books of the “how to” variety. Howard Kirschenbaum, a strong proponent of values clarification, observed that there are at least a dozen books (with a total of over one million copies in print) and scores of articles available (1977, p. 1). Over a half million copies of *Values Clarification: A Handbook of Practical Strategies for Teachers and Students* are in circulation. That values clarification is easily accessible to teachers is evident from the fact that the movement boasts a network of over a hundred trainers who have conducted workshops in the “how” of values clarification for more than two hundred thousand teachers, counselors, and helping professionals (Kurtz, 1978, p. 7). Values clarification also has made its way into philosophical circles, thus wielding an influence on philosophy instructors and not just “educational” instructors. One example of this was the symposium on “Value Clarification and Moral Development in Education” held in Washington, D.C. in December 1978 and conducted by various speakers, including one of the original proponents of values clarification, Merrill Harmin.

Second, Purpel and Ryan observed that teachers have the satisfaction of considering openly and honestly very important issues, and cited as examples racial attitudes and an individual’s life goals.\*

Third, the teacher does not have to be “didactic”—i.e., the teacher’s views are not imposed on the students. No **direct** attempt is made to change the students’ views. Rather, the teacher functions as one

---

\* More will be said on this point in the critique. I shall contend that values clarification advocates (although considering some very important issues) also consider what I would term mere trivia.

who provides opportunities for the student to think through some of the confusion with which he/she is confronted.

Fourth, many teachers report that “values clarification works” and that it “turns kids on” in what is otherwise a dreary and primarily irrelevant curriculum.

Having considered some of the reasons for the growth and popularity of values clarification as an approach to moral education, I would like to present: (1) a brief explanation of the values clarification approach; and (2) a brief examination of some of its philosophical roots.

First, what is the values clarification approach to moral education? This approach is advanced by Raths, Harmin, and Simon against the background of our technological society. Raths, et al. hold (and it generally is agreed upon) that a wide range of conflicting values present themselves to each person. In view of this medley of conflicting values, children seem to be **confused in values**. Those children who experience value confusion “...are often identifiable by idiosyncratic behavior patterns—inconsistency, drift, overconformity, overdissension, and chronic posing; and frequently, underachievement” (1966, p. 8).

Given this value confusion and idiosyncratic behavior pattern, it is the task of each person “...to wrest his own values from the available array” (Raths, et al., 1966, p. 10). Raths (the originator of values clarification) encouraged students to think for themselves about their value confusion in an effort to enable them to be more self-directing in life’s confusions. Merrill Harmin (co-author with Raths) notes that Raths’ view was built on Dewey’s suggestions that reflection on life experiences would serve integration of sense, need, impulse, and action (1979, p. 23). This reflection, then, could be said to serve values clarity. To assist the student in this reflection process, and help clarify confusions, in order “...that they might more harmoniously direct their energies and manage their lives” (Harmin, 1979, p. 23), is the basic message of values clarification. Values clarification advocates hold that if this assistance can be provided, then instead of value confusion and idiosyncratic behavior patterns such as apathy, flightiness, etc. (as mentioned above), “...behavior patterns suggesting more harmony within, such as enthusiasm, persistence and self-direction” will emerge (Harmin, 1979, p. 23). The following statement by Harmin provides a

summary of the aim of values clarification. “Values clarification is merely meant to do what it is meant to do, which is to assist people to think through life’s confusions so they might be less confused and so they might learn skills of self-direction that will serve them in the future” (Harmin, 1979, p. 26).

In approaching moral education in this way, Rath and his colleagues are concerned not with the **content** of people’s values, but with a **process** approach to values—i.e., they are concerned with the process of valuing rather than the nature of values themselves. This approach does not focus on the transmission of any particular set of values (for it does not hold that there is any “right” set). For values clarification advocates, there are no absolute values. In speaking of the process approach to values clarification, Simon noted that it “...is based on the premise that none of us has the ‘right’ set of values...” (1976, p. 127). To further substantiate this relativistic position, I would like to quote the following statement by Rath: “‘How did he get his ideas?’ is a more fundamental question for us than ‘What [ideas—DL] did he get?’ We believe that each person has to wrest **his own values** from the available array” (1966, p. 10, emp. added).

According to values clarification, values are based on three processes: (1) choosing; (2) prizing; and (3) acting. Accordingly, value is defined as that which results when and only when **all seven** of the criteria given below are satisfied:

- Choosing: (1) freely  
(2) from alternatives  
(3) after thoughtful consideration of the consequences of each alternative
- Prizing: (4) cherishing, being happy with the choice  
(5) willing to affirm the choice publicly
- Acting: (6) doing something with the choice  
(7) repeatedly, in some pattern of life (Rath, et al., 1930, p. 30).

These processes collectively define valuing. Unless something satisfies **all seven** of the criteria, then it is not regarded as a value. Further, it is clear that it is not the aim of values clarification to teach a particular set of values, but instead to help students by means of different strategies (see discussion below) to engage in one or more of the above processes and thus personally develop and clarify value confusion that they may have concerning already-formed convictions and behavior.

Thus far, some theoretical considerations have been advanced. On the practical level, values clarification employs a variety of “strategies” (teaching techniques) that teachers can use to engage students in the above processes.\* The basic strategy involved in values clarification is called the **clarifying response**.\*\* The clarifying response is:

“...a way of responding to a student that results in his considering what he has chosen, what he prizes, and/or what he is doing. It stimulates him to clarify his thinking and behavior and thus to clarify his values; it encourages him to think about them” (Raths, et al., 1966, p. 1).

Some examples of clarifying responses (as offered by Raths) are: “Is this something that you prize?” “Did you consider any alternatives?” “Did you have to choose that; was it a free choice?” To see how clarifying responses are used in an actual situation, consider the following dialogue by Raths. The situation occurs between lessons and the student has just told his teacher that science is his favorite subject (Raths, et al., 1966, p. 55).

Teacher: What exactly do you like about science?  
Student: Specifically? Let me see. Gosh, I’m not sure.  
I guess I just like it in general.  
Teacher: Do you do anything outside of school to have fun with science?  
Student: No, not really.  
Teacher: Thank you, Jim. I must get back to work now.

In this incident the clarifying response is supposed to get the student to clarify his thinking and to examine his behavior in order to determine consistency with his ideas—thereby clarifying what the student genuinely holds as a value. The clarifying response is designed to raise questions in the student’s mind. No attempt is made to moralize, criticize, suggest values, etc.

This summarizes the basic theoretical and practical features of values clarification as an approach to moral education. Values clarification entails a type of Socratic dialogue in which a person is urged to re-

---

\* Cf. Simon, Sidney, L.W. Howe, and H. Kirschenbaum (1972), *Values Clarification: A Handbook of Practical Strategies for Teachers and Students* (New York: Hart) This text contains probably the most widely used “strategies.”

\*\* The clarifying response is just one of the many “strategies” used in values clarification. Others consist of value sheets, role-playing, the value continuum, etc. (Cf. *Values and Teaching* and *Values Clarification: A Handbook of Practical Strategies for Teachers and Students* for a detailed discussion of these different strategies.

flect on his own life experiences and to clarify his own values. The following provides a brief statement relative to some philosophical roots of values clarification.

A value curriculum, whether it be the values clarification approach or some other, is rooted in some type of educational philosophy. It appears that a number of different philosophical positions serve as the foundation of the values clarification approach.\* It is not within the scope of this paper to give a detailed analysis of any of these philosophical systems. I will comment briefly concerning one particular system, which seems to be the governing philosophical foundation of values clarification—**existentialism**.

Existentialism is not easily defined. The fundamental thesis of existentialism is that existence is prior to essence. This means that first and above all man exists and man's goal in life is an attempt to define himself in the world in which he lives. My purpose is not to explore the divergent interpretations given to existentialism, but rather to look at the meaning of existentialism in an educational context. George Kneller (who has attempted to outline those elements of philosophy that are relevant to a proper understanding of education) offered the following comment to document the relationship existentialism has to education:

The only values acceptable to the individual are those that he has freely adopted.... Values that are not freely chosen are valueless. The teacher should not impose his own values but should present the principles in which he believes and the reasons for them, and ask the pupil to choose whether he will accept them or not. Existentialism does not require the school to condone moral anarchy in its students. But it does assert that the student can no longer be conditioned by his teacher into accepting supposedly timeless moral principles, which he must uphold inflexibly whatever their cost in human suffering or their repugnance to himself (1964, p. 65).

A teacher functioning in an existentialist context avoids instruction in “timeless moral principles” and insists that the student freely choose his own values. This is exactly what the advocates of values clarification do when they: (1) avoid teaching a particular set of values; and (2) insist that the student clarify and defend his own values. In doing the latter, the student maintains the values he already holds, but is able (according to advocates of values clarification) to manage his life more harmoniously in a world of

---

\* There presently exists much debate concerning the relationship between values clarification (and other approaches to moral education) and secular humanism. See the symposium conducted on this issue in the November/December 1978 issue of *The Humanist*. I will not explore this discussion here. Further, I will not examine (at this point) how values clarification is grounded in relativism. That discussion will be taken up in the critique.

confusion. Further, existentialism places much responsibility on **personal** responsibility and facing up to the consequences of one's own moral actions. This is consistent with values clarification in that the student is responsible for the clarification of his own personal values and is taught to make his decisions responsibly.

More can be said concerning the philosophical foundation of values clarification, but perhaps this is sufficient to indicate that value curricula in general are rooted in a philosophical framework and that the values clarification approach to moral instruction (as a value curriculum) in particular finds its roots in some fundamental tenets of existentialism. However, this is not to say that there are not other philosophical systems that may be foundational to values clarification.

### **CRITIQUE OF THE VALUES CLARIFICATION APPROACH**

There can be no doubt that values clarification as an approach to moral education has had (and is having) a considerable amount of influence on both teachers and students. Its growth and popularity as a result of books, articles, workshops, etc., cannot be disputed. However, values clarification as an adequate approach to moral education **is** open to dispute. In the following critique, I will show that values clarification (as presently outlined by its advocates) should be rejected as a means employed by the school to enable a child to develop morally. I base my contention on the following criticisms of values clarification. First, the values clarification approach to moral education is extremely superficial. Second, there are problems concerning the definition of value as seen by advocates of values clarification. Third, the values clarification approach is inadequate because it relativizes moral values.

First, consider the superficiality of the values clarification approach. One might conclude that values clarification enables a person to look inwardly at himself in an in-depth way and reflect on some of life's confusions with the hope that a less confused person will emerge. This is at least what advocates of this approach claim (see page 6). However, upon closer examination it appears that values clarification concentrates on (in addition to some important matters) what I would term superficial, trivial, and petty matters. A case in point is a situation cited by Merrill Harmin (1979, p. 23). Harmin imagined a teacher who hypothesizes that Sally might be confused about her values because she is unusually flighty.

“One day the teacher walks over to Sally and asks pleasantly, ‘What do you like most about doodling?’ ‘Huh? I’m not sure,’ says Sally. ‘Fine,’ responds the teacher, ‘We will be starting the lesson in a few minutes now. I was just wondering.’”

The purpose of this dialogue, according to Harmin, is to stimulate Sally to clarify values about which she may be confused. Thus, Sally might say to herself later, “What is it that I like about doodling? What do I really like about anything?”

This appears to me to be a very superficial concept to qualify as subject matter for values clarification. Presupposed by Harmin is that “doodling” is a value—otherwise it could not be clarified. But, are we ready to elevate “doodling” to the position of a value that is chosen freely, prized, and acted upon? Advocates of values clarification should make a distinction concerning values. Perhaps they could distinguish between (1) superficial values and (2) profound values and then reserve values clarification for an in-depth study of those profound values while omitting discussions of trivial matters such as “doodling.”

Admittedly, Harmin might say that neither he nor any other advocate of values clarification is interested in “doodling” for its own sake. He might base this on what he projected Sally might say to herself after the discussion with her teacher—namely, “What do I really like about anything?” Thus, he would view the whole discussion between Sally and her teacher as a means toward a higher end—i.e., an attempt to clarify superficial values (doodling) in an effort to help one clarify profound values (such as moral values). I grant that Harmin might argue such in this particular case; however, it is evident that he (and other advocates of values clarification) is/are concerned with the clarification of matters that do not lend themselves to **real** importance for one’s life when he says that “Values clarification is also concerned with issues that have few moral implications and that are essentially **private**: for example, What dress shall I wear to the party?” (1979, p. 25, emp. added).

By admitting that values clarification also is concerned to help persons clarify **private** matters, he opens the door for practically any and everything imaginable. Further, to show that it is not unfair to charge values clarification advocates with superficiality, one must only recall the purpose of values clarification (as set forth in this paper) as an approach to moral education—namely, to enable a child to pro-

gress in **moral development**. This precludes a clarification of such petty matters as what one likes most about doodling and what dress one should wear to a party.

Second, I wish to make some comments concerning problems with the definition of value as seen by the proponents of values clarification. I am aware of the difficulty involved in arriving at a consensus for the definition of "value." The remarks that follow do not claim to cite a "correct" definition of value, but function only negatively to demonstrate the inadequacy of the definition of value as conceived by values clarification proponents.

According to values clarification, "value" is synonymous with fulfillment of the following seven criteria (or processes) for obtaining a value: (1) choosing freely; (2) choosing from alternatives; (3) choosing after thoughtful consideration of the consequences of each alternative; (4) prizing and cherishing; (5) publicly affirming; (6) acting upon choices; and (7) acting upon choices repeatedly. "Unless something satisfies all seven of the criteria..., we do not call it a value" (Raths, et al., p. 128). Many of the requirements for something to be a value seem to be open to dispute.

The first problem concerning the definition of value according to values clarification concerns the requirement of "choosing." For anything to be a value according to values clarification, it must be chosen freely. However, there are cases in which a person might be said to value something, yet that which is valued may not have been freely chosen. As a case in point, consider a person who is reared in a strong religious tradition. Among other things this person holds as a value that it is wrong to gamble. He holds this value not because he (1) chose it freely, (2) chose it from alternatives, or (3) chose it after thoughtful consideration of the consequences, but for the simple reason that his parents held the same value and "handed down" that value to their children. Holding gambling to be wrong is, for this person, a matter of family tradition. According to values clarification, this person could not be said to value his conviction!

I grant that it would be better for a person to choose from alternatives after thoughtful consideration of the consequences. However, the point seems to be whether a person could be said to value a particular thing or conviction if this is not the procedure employed. Further, it is not at all clear exactly what is meant by such expressions as "thoughtful consideration of the consequences." We are not told what this

involves, how one does it, etc. Does it mean that some consequences are better than others? If so, how does one decide this? For proper evaluation of consequences, there must be **some** criteria that can be used. Are some criteria better than others? Advocates of values clarification are unable to deal adequately with such questions, especially in view of their position that values are **relative**. More will be said on this in the third criticism.

The criteria that for something to be a value it must be (1) publicly affirmed and (2) acted upon also raise difficulties. Speaking of public affirmation as a requirement of a value, Raths noted: "If we are ashamed of a choice, if we would not make our position known when appropriately asked, we would not be dealing with values but with something else" (1966, p. 29). This statement is most misleading. What if a person is asked (whether appropriately or inappropriately) whether he holds as a value that gambling is wrong, and then chooses (perhaps because he already has clarified his value) to remain silent? Does his failure to respond change the status (as to value) of his conviction concerning gambling? Raths does not take into consideration the fact that it often is unwise to state publicly one's convictions (e.g., one living in the Soviet Union and holding that communism as a form of government should be abolished). Again, this requirement for public affirmation seems to be a requirement of conformity—namely, that one conform his convictions regarding value to Raths' requirements (one of which is public affirmation).

Further problems emerge when it is demanded that for something to be a value it must be "acted upon." One of the "clarifying reasons" is "do you do anything about that idea?" Concerning this response, Raths says, "A verbalization that is not lived has little import and is **certainly not** a value" (1966, p. 58, emp. added.) Thus, according to this criterion one may: (1) choose something freely; (2) choose from alternatives; (3) choose after thoughtful consideration of the consequences of each alternative; (4) prize his choice; and (5) even publicly affirm his decision, but without **acting upon** his decision, it cannot meet the test of a value. This seems both ambiguous and very opinionated. It is ambiguous in that we are not told exactly what is entailed by "action." Is it not the case that public affirmation itself is in some ways action? Evidently not, for Raths suggested, "The person who talks about something but never does anything about it is dealing with something other than a value" (1966, p. 29). Suppose the person who holds as a value

that gambling is wrong, but who, up to a point, has been silent concerning his convictions, suddenly is “appropriately asked” about his position and discloses his true convictions? Does this affirmation qualify as an action? Values clarification does not help us here.

The requirements for a value to be acted upon are very **opinionated** for the simple reason that we are not given any reasons for accepting the view that values must be acted upon other than Raths’, Harmin’s, and Simon’s own statements. Their system is built upon their own assumption as to **what** values are and **how** they may be transmitted.

A further difficulty with values clarification’s insistence that a value be acted upon was noted by Alan Lockwood when he stated that advocates of values clarification “...fail to address the problem of determining what actions are consistent with what values” (1975, p. 37). This statement might be illustrated with the historical debate concerning the SALT treaty between the United States and the Soviet Union. Both those for, and those against, the treaty claimed to hold as a value world peace; yet it is clear that they do not agree on which action represents the value of world peace. Both those who favor the treaty and those who are against it may be said to value peace according to values clarification.

As Lockwood pointed out, advocates of values clarification might say in reply to this that those who are both for and against a given thing or conviction (in this case, the treaty) may be said to hold values because they have **acted upon** their claims. However, this is to say that values clarification holds the view that the same value can support contradictory positions (1975, p. 38). To hold this appears to be in contrast to a fundamental tenet of values clarification—namely, that the clarifications of one’s values should provide behavior patterns that suggest more harmony, consistency, etc. (see pages 6-7). Thus, although individuals may think their actions are consistent with their value claims, it really is not clear as to what action(s) if any is (are) demanded by a particular value claim.

Making the matter of “action” even more problematic is the seventh criterion that must be satisfied for a particular belief or conviction to qualify as a value—namely, “acting repeatedly, in some pattern of life (Raths, et al., 1966, p. 30). Howard Kirschenbaum (an advocate of values clarification) expressed some misgivings about Raths’ seven processes of valuing when he wrote: “How proud must someone be

of a belief before it may be considered a ‘value’? How **many** alternatives must be considered before the ‘alternatives’ criterion is satisfied? How **often** must action be repeated? And so on. No one can say except the individual...” (1977, p. 9).

What does “repeatedly” mean? As Kirschenbaum asked: “How **often** must action be repeated?” Twice? More than twice? Values clarification does not help us here. Suppose a person has only had the opportunity to act upon his value one time? Would this be “repeated” action?

Kirschenbaum is to be commended for his misgivings about some of the criteria of the values clarification approach. Apparently he holds that if some of the seven criteria are amended (or omitted, for that matter) then the values clarification approach as a means to enable moral development might be acceptable. However, the values clarification approach still remains inadequate because it espouses the relativity of moral values, which leads me to my next criticism.

Third, the values clarification approach as a means employed by the school to enable the child to develop morally should be rejected because its moral position is relative.\* In the following discussion, I will show that values clarification is inadequate because: (1) it fails to distinguish between matters of personal taste and objective moral value; (2) it can be used to justify any ethical position; (3) it has no adequate criteria by which to resolve value conflicts; and (4) it espouses a moral position that is dishonest.

First, before I clarify the charge of relativism against values clarification, I wish to make some remarks concerning the necessity of distinguishing between matters of personal taste and moral values. Moral values and matters of personal taste should not be treated in the same way. If this distinction is not made by a value curriculum, it is probable that moral value decisions will be treated in the same manner as decisions about taste—relativistically. Generally speaking, the distinction between decisions about personal taste and moral value decisions is that in the former one **is not willing** to legislate for others, and in the latter, one **is willing**. Thus, I may say, “I like spinach”; if another person says that he does not, then my response is that our tastes differ. On the other hand, I may say, “Abortion is wrong”; if another person

---

\* See: Lockwood, Alan L. (1975), pp. 35-50; Purpel, David and K. Ryan (1976), pp. 330-348.

says he thinks abortion is right, then my response is that he is mistaken. In this case, I am willing to legislate for others.

Having distinguished between matters of personal taste and moral values, I now will consider the approach taken by values clarification. There is no attempt by values clarification to make a distinction between personal taste and moral values. The emphasis is not on **what** (i.e., the content) one holds as a value, but on **how** (i.e., the process) one attains a set of values. This is to be expected in view of the fact that advocates of values clarification deliberately and unequivocally take a relativistic stand about values in general. Speaking of values clarification, Harmin and Simon hold that the approach "...is not based on the assumption that absolute goods exist and can be known." Values are viewed as "relative, personal, and situational." The main task "...is not to identify and transmit the 'right' values, but to help a student clarify his own values so he can obtain the values that best suit him and his environment" (Harmin and Simon 1973, p. 11, emp. added). Values are a product of our experiences (Raths, 1966, p. 36). Thus, what might be wrong today might turn out to be right tomorrow, depending on one's experiences. A value is right if it is right for you—if it best suits one in his or her particular situation.

These considerations have devastating consequences. Matters of personal taste as well as moral value decisions are "relative, personal, and situational." Thus, there is no difference as far as quality is concerned—whether one is deciding to wear a particular dress to a party or is deciding on what political system to embrace. The decision is based on personal preference after one has reflected on his own unique experience. If advocates of values clarification said that matters of personal taste were strictly relative, then there would not be a dispute; I agree that one's preference for orange sherbet over spinach is a matter of personal taste. However, to make moral value decisions a matter of personal taste is to make it possible for any and every ethical system to be justified. This leads me to my second criticism.

Second, the relativism of values clarification can be used to justify any and every moral position. As stated on page 12, one may identify and clarify his moral values\* by satisfying Raths' seven processes: (1) choosing freely; (2) choosing from alternatives; (3) choosing after thoughtful consideration of the consequences of each alternative; (4) prizing and cherishing; (5) public affirming; (6) acting upon choices; and (7) acting upon choices repeatedly. It is clear that practically any value system could meet these criteria. Consider the value system adhered to by the Nazis under Hitler. It is well known that the Nazis subjected millions of Jews (and others also) to all sorts of human indignities and then killed them—men, women, and children—in agonizing ways. Their value system dictated that it was **morally right** for the Nazis to do all they could to exterminate the Jewish people. This value system (characterized by such atrocities) can be justified quite easily on the basis of the criteria of values clarification.

- (1) The Nazis did what they did because they **freely chose** to do it. No one forced them to try to exterminate the Jews.
- (2) They also could have tortured and killed the Jews by choosing from other possible **alternatives**.
- (3) Further, they were certainly aware of the possible **consequences** they faced as a result of selecting the alternative they did.
- (4) They certainly **prized** the course of action they followed.
- (5) They were willing to **affirm** their decision **publicly**.
- (6) The Nazis **acted** on what they chose to do about the Jews.
- (7) Finally, it is clear that they **acted** upon their decision **repeatedly**. Again and again they murdered innocent people. Thus, given the criteria of the values clarification system, such heinous crimes committed by the Nazis can be justified.

The Jews, on the other hand, had a different value system. They held it as a value that it was **morally wrong** for the Nazis to try to exterminate the Jews. Again, this value can satisfy the seven criteria described above. Concerning their value, the Jews: (1) chose it freely; (2) chose it from alternative values; (3) chose it after thoughtful consideration of the consequences; (4) prized their value decision; (5) were willing to publicly affirm it; (6) acted upon their value; and (7) acted upon it repeatedly.

---

\* This is also the same process one uses to identify and clarify matters of personal taste. However, I limit this discussion to a consideration of moral values since I already have admitted the relativity of matters of personal taste—an admission I do not allow for moral values.

Therefore, according to advocates of values clarification, not only can any moral position (such as those of the Nazis and the Jews) be justified by the seven criteria of a value, but values clarification entails two contradictory moral positions (the position held by the Nazis that it was **morally right** to murder the Jews, and the Jews' position that it was **morally wrong** for the Nazis to murder them) can be equally justified. Any value curriculum that entails such a position cannot be suitable for the moral development of a child.

Third, the values clarification system has no adequate criteria by which to resolve value conflicts. This is clear from the second objection discussed previously. By demonstrating that both the value system of the Nazis and the value system of the Jews can be equally justified by the criteria of values clarification, I also have shown that their criteria are not adequate to resolve **any** value conflicts.

Recall what advocates of values clarification suggest that the values clarification system will provide. They claim that instead of value confusion and idiosyncratic behavior patterns such as apathy, flightiness, etc., the assistance provided by values clarification will suggest behavior patterns that exhibit more "...harmony within, such as enthusiasm, persistence and self-direction" (Harmin, 1973, p. 23). However, if values clarification exemplifies a relativistic system, then it also can be argued that there is no real point in attempting to resolve the conflict between apathy and enthusiasm. Why is it the case that one of these behavior patterns is any better than any other? Given relativism, one person's value decision (such as apathy) is as good as a conflicting value decision (such as enthusiasm). Each is entitled to his own opinion.

Fourth, values clarification as a means to promote moral development espouses a moral position that is dishonest.\* If we are to understand this objection properly, two points must be set forth. First, advocates of values clarification hold to the view that values are relative. From statements I already have cited (see pages 6, 16-17), it is clear (according to values clarification) that there is **no right set** of values. Rather, values are viewed as "relative, personal, and situational." Statements advocating the relativity of values

---

\* I am indebted to B.C. Postow for calling this particular point to my attention. The argument I use in this section is patterned after her article, "Dishonest Relativism," in *Analysis* (1979), 39:45-48.

abound in the writings of values clarification. From this (as observed in the first three objections concerning the relativity of values) we may conclude that advocates of values clarification are committed to holding that a view which conflicts with their own may be as well-rounded or justified as their own. Second, advocates of values clarification hold that people should do certain things—namely, clarify their **own** value confusion. Specifically, advocates of values clarification, although believing other views to be equally as valuable as their own (an admission from holding values to be relative), cling to the view that what they believe is to be preferred (Raths, et al., 1966, p. ix). Accepting one view (such as values clarification) while believing that a conflicting view is equally justified, is dishonest.

The following illustrates why a position such as values clarification is dishonest. The theory of values clarification implies that students ought to clarify their value confusion; e.g., they ought to (by means of values clarification procedures) move from apathetic behavior patterns to enthusiastic ones. Students are urged to utilize the seven value criteria to do this. But, advocates of values clarification (by holding values to be relative) must believe apathetic behavior patterns may be equally well grounded as their own value choices—enthusiastic behavior patterns.\* Thus, advocates of values clarification believe that students may have no reason to move from apathetic behavior patterns to enthusiastic ones. Values clarification advocates urge students to do something that (by their own admissions) they may have no reason to do. To do this is to be **dishonest**.

### SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

In summary, I have shown that moral education has as its basic aim the moral development of the child and that this education takes place in various institutions such as the family, the church, and the school. Further, I have explained one particular approach to moral education employed presently by the schools—values clarification. Finally, and most importantly, I have demonstrated that this approach to

---

\* Advocates of values clarification might say that apathetic behavior patterns are **not** equally grounded as enthusiastic ones because nobody who considered the matter would choose apathetic behavior. However, the question does not seem to be what one may or may not choose. The question is, “What is the logical implication of holding values to be relative?” I contend that the logical implication is that **any** behavior pattern may be equally as well grounded as any other behavior pattern.

moral development should be rejected because: (1) it is extremely superficial; (2) its definition of value is inadequate; and (3) it relativizes moral issues.

## REFERENCES

- Dewey, John (1934), *A Common Faith* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press).
- Hall, Robert (1978), "Indoctrination Revisited," *The Humanist*, November/December.
- Harmin, Merrill and S. Simon (1973), "Values," *Readings in Values Clarification*, ed. S.B. Simon and H. Kirschenbaum (Minneapolis, MN: Winston Press).
- Harmin, Merrill (1979), "A Review" of Values Clarification," *The Phi Kappa Phi Journal*, 69:23, Winter.
- Kirschenbaum, Howard (1977), *Advanced Value Clarification* (La Jolla, CA: University Associates).
- Kneller, George F. (1964), *Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: John Wiley & Sons).
- Kurtz, Paul, editor (1978), "Moral Education and Secular Humanism," *The Humanist*, November/December.
- Raths, Louis, M. Harmin, and S.B. Simon (1966), *Values and Teaching* (Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill).
- Lockwood, Alan. (1975), "A Critical View of Values Clarification," *Teachers' College Record*, 77:37, September.
- Purpel, David and K. Ryan, ed. (1976), *Moral Education* (Berkeley, CA: McCutchan).
- Ryan, Kevin and M.G. Thompson (1975), "Moral Education's Muddled Mandate: Comment on a Survey of Phi Delta Kappans," *Phi Delta Kappan*, 56:663, June.
- Simon, Sidney B. (1976), "Values Clarification vs. Indoctrination," *Moral Education*, ed. D. Purpel and K. Ryan (Berkeley, CA: McCutchan).
- Wilson, John, N. Williams and B. Sugarman (1967), *Introduction to Moral Education* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin).